

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 21, 2003

The Honorable Bill Frist
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Bill:

Senators Domenici and Kennedy introduced S. 486, the *Senator Paul Wellstone Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2003*, on February 27, 2003. Despite having 66 cosponsors, that bill still awaits action in the Senate.

As the number of cosponsors indicates, S. 486 has a strong bipartisan history, with Senators Domenici and Wellstone as its long-time champions, and a wide array of both Republican and Democratic cosponsors in this Congress. In fact, very similar provisions passed the Senate as part of the FY2002 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill.

As you know, S. 486 would prohibit group health plans from imposing treatment limitations or financial requirements on mental health benefits unless comparable limitations are imposed on medical and surgical benefits. This bill would build on the landmark *Mental Health Parity Act of 1996*, which required group health plans that cover mental illness to offer benefits with the same annual and lifetime limits in care it offers for medical and surgical benefits. Passage of S. 486 is critical to close loopholes insurance companies have continued to use to limit coverage.

According to the General Accounting Office (GAO), many employers and insurance companies have continued to discriminate against individuals with mental illness even after enactment of the 1996 law. They require patients to pay higher deductibles or copayments for mental health services than for other medical services. Some companies also severely limit inpatient care and the number of outpatient visits for mental health care. The GAO also reports that a number of employers have ignored the law completely.

Numerous groups, including the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, agree that action is needed to ensure fair mental health coverage. S. 486 would remedy the continued discrimination.

One year ago this Saturday, we lost our dear friend and colleague Paul Wellstone. We can think of no more fitting way to honor his memory than to pass this bipartisan bill. We urge you to set aside our other business for one hour on Thursday, October 23, so that we may take up and pass S. 486, the *Senator Paul Wellstone Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2003*.

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| Tom Joschke | Paul McCarty |
| Dan Claitor | Tom Harkin |
| Charles Schumer | Paul Sarbanes |
| Frank R. Lautenberg | Jeanne Feinstein |
| Harry Reid | Jay Byrnes |
| Jon Kyl | Max Baucus |
| Bob Crist | Al Franken |
| Jack Reed | Wally White |
| Debbie Stabenow | Byron Dorgan |

Robert A. Taft

Bill Nelson

Maria Canine

J. L. L.

Tom Hark

Russell D. Feingold

Hunt Lennard

Hugh Kohl

Barbara Boler

Blanche L. Lincoln

Dick D.

John Edwards

Gene Miller

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Chris Dodd

Erin Bayh

Patrick Leahy